

LOVE, MIRIAM

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“Patrick! Stop daydreaming and help me, stupid boy! Why do you never do as you are told?”

At twenty-nine years old, I am not a boy. I have no idea how my father managed to spend twenty years with her before throwing himself from the observation deck of the basilica. The only note he left to explain was in a card for my eighteenth birthday the following week, signed “She’s all yours. Take care of her.” I knew he did not mean the car.

She is perched precariously in the storage room, up on the ancient wooden step-ladder Grandfather built decades ago. Watching her, I pause. Its rails are bowing under her ample weight and I will it to give out, to take her down. Perhaps as she fell, her flailing hands would reach out and pull down the thick, wooden shelves freshly loaded with a yesterday’s heavy shipment of Gruyère de Comté discs. I envision her crushed under a heap of curd and weighted wood. Death-by-cheese—fitting for a third-generation cheesemonger. I see her forehead furrow, a sure signal that another verbal lashing is about to begin. The bell rings to announce the opening of the shop door. With a sigh I reach up and shift the box out of her hands, and allow my mother to return to ground-level safety—this time.

I turn to attend to Madame Beaufort, shuffling in as she does every Tuesday morning. Fur layered over her pink, quilted house-coat despite the July sun, her mothly odor mingles with the pungent cheeses in the case between us.

“Your usual Camembert and Comté, Madame?”

“Oui, Patrick. Also, a bit of Brie for Miriam, please. You know how she likes Brie.”

My hand fumbles with the paper as I reach to wrap the cheeses, fingers twitching at the sound of her name.

“Is Miriam home, then?”

I hope the slight cracking in my voice does not betray me. Miriam’s great-aunt has a keen talent for reading people.

“Oui. She arrived late last night. Her gallery showings in Nice

and Marseille went well. Now she is back to brood and mope in my flat while she decides on her next subject.”

I think to myself that Miriam could never do anything as common and vulgar as brooding and moping.

“Then, please, tell her bonjour and welcome home from me. She will pick up your order on Saturday as usual?”

Her eyes betray the smile that fails to appear on her lips.

“I will send her to you. For the cheese, of course.”

The pungent packages handed over to the old woman, I wish her good day and hold my breath as she shuffles back out into the heat.

Seeing that we’re alone again, Mama throws herself into her favorite past-time: berating me, telling me how useless I am, how I am just like my father, how I will never amount to anything. I keep my back to her as I rearrange the window display and tune out her insults as I watch the world beyond the pane.

Carefree students from the nearby university stroll by in groups of twos and threes on their way to the métro station at Guillotière. A pair of lovers embrace on the stoop of the Turkish bar across the street. Cocoa-skinned children skip ahead of their Moroccan mothers, adorned with brightly colored hijabs, heading to the market next to the pizzeria at the end of the block. I am the lonely foreigner here.

So lonely.

Yet, Miriam is home again. Perhaps now I could tell her. After all these years, I should tell her.

Miriam Deschaux, with her golden locks and wide, grey-hazel eyes, has always reminded me of a sunflower: she appears graceful, soft and simple from a distance, but viewed close-up she is far stronger, more layered, and more complex than expected. And like a field of sunflowers, she is usually surrounded by a *buzz* as eager bees—men and women—flock to her beauty, fight over her energy.

We met the year before she left for university, the year her parents had died and she came to this street in Lyon to live with her great-aunt. My mother saw the way I looked at Miriam from the very first time she came to fetch her aunt’s cheese. As usual, Mama did not approve. As if she knows what I am thinking, she interrupts my thoughts.

“Patrick. Don’t bother with that one. You’re not good enough for her.”

I am never good enough, not for my mother. My years alone with

her following my father's suicide have taught me to keep my feelings to myself.

And all this time I have left the love I feel for my sunflower unspoken. Miriam went to art school in Paris, and then jetted off to gallery shows and traveled the world for creative inspiration. I have stayed at the cheese shop, stayed with my mother to honor my father's request. Every Saturday Miriam is in town she comes to see me. At least, that is how I like to think of it. In her view it is likely that she is simply running an errand for her aunt, doing nothing more than exchanging pleasantries with the local shop-boy. She does not see how much joy these exchanges bring to me.

Silence interrupts my mental wanderings. I realize Mama has stopped her carrying on, though I do not dare to turn to look for the cause of the unexpected repose. Never make eye contact with this breed of predator.

I reach over near the front of the display and pick up a few packages of Fromage aux Artisous. The small, dusty looking mites serving as the rind are beginning to wake beneath the wrap, struggling to crawl in the morning sun. An underestimated delicacy, only a few customers will be brave enough to purchase it. I loosen the wrap on one of the bundles and watch the creatures scamper about. Knowing what a treat lies beneath their exoskeletons for any that dare to look beyond the obvious ugliness, brings a twinge of a smile to my face.

"What are you smiling about, idiot? Wrap that back up! I don't want those things getting all over my counter. Why do you even bother to stock that? The only one to buy it is that *putain*, the whore across the street, the one who lives above the bar with her pot-head American boyfriend."

I continue watching the mites in silence. They are essential to the ripening of the cheese. Yet, when the cheese is ready they are no longer needed. They are brushed aside, discarded like the garbage they are, so that the surprisingly mild and creamy center can be fully savored. Wrapping them back up, I know that it is time. I will tell Miriam when I see her, but first there is another task to which I must attend.

Mama's returned to her monologue, cataloguing every way in which I fail her, Mayor Collomb fails her, France fails her. Back up on the ladder, she does not notice me behind her as she rearranges the cutting boards and wrapping paper in the storeroom. I can see the

surprise in her eyes when she whirls around at the touch of my hand on her shoulder. Knocked to the ground, she does not believe that I am capable of it. I reach up and yank the shelves free, releasing their dense burdens onto her. She does not move again, but just to be sure I retrieve a few of the heavier wheels and shelves, drop them on her again. Checking for a pulse, and finding none, I make the call.

“18 Rue Du Monde. Parrett Fromager. It’s my mother. She’s had a bad fall...”

“An unfortunate accident,” they said as they took her body away.

There will be no funeral, for funerals are for those who mourn the departed. There is no one in that category for my mother. I spent all day yesterday repairing the storage room and readying the shop to be reopened in time for Miriam’s visit today. All that is left of Mama and her wretchedness is her moldy scent, lingering here in our flat above the shop.

“Mi-ri-aaamm. Mi-ri-aaamm.”

I love the way her name feels deep in my lungs. I inhale the first two syllables, and exhale the final “am,” drawing it out in a chant.

“Mi-ri-aaamm. Mi-ri-aaamm.”

All week, since Madame Beaufort informed me of her return, I have watched for her through the window of the shop, waited to catch a glimpse of gold as she walks through the sunlight. I have not been rewarded.

Today, though? Today is Saturday. She will come, and I will tell her. Mama is gone, she can no longer object. For a normal mother, a normal son might be too mired in his grief to pursue love. Madame Parrett was not a normal mother, and I do not grieve her. I celebrate her absence. And today, that celebration will be in the form of a confession to the woman I love.

I smooth down the front of my crisp, white apron in anticipation and open the shop a few minutes early. My invitation to Miriam is ready and folded into the outer wrapper of her beloved Brie. She will return to her aunt’s flat, open the note to read it. She will come to me at eight p.m. as I have asked of her. I cannot risk telling her in front of other customers.

She arrives for her aunt’s cheese just after eleven. I hand over the packages and our fingertips brush in the exchange, my heart skipping into a one-two-three rhythm.

Mi-ri-am. Mi-ri-am.

Then she is gone, like she always is, with a delicate “au revoir,” and a smile that has the power to extract all the oxygen from my lungs. And again, I am left to wait.

Noon. One o'clock. Two.

Every passing tick-tock of the clock makes it harder to breathe. The usual customers come, conveying their sympathy at my loss. They excuse my distracted detachment as grief over my mother's death.

Three. Four o'clock. Five.

I close the shop and return to my flat to prepare the flowers, the dinner, the wine. She has to come, she has to know. I cannot consider that she might not.

Six. Seven o'clock. Eight.

A knock on the door to the flat and I stand breathing, silently meditating on her name for a moment more before opening the door.

Mi-ri-aamm. Mi-ri-aamm.

Hands trembling, I open the door to confusion.

“Madame Beaufort?” I say. “What are you doing here?”

The stairwell behind her is empty.

“Patrick. She's not coming.”

“What do you mean? She has...”

“Patrick, she cannot come.”

“I do not understand, Madame. If she does not want to come, why would she not tell me herself? Why would she send you?”

“Patrick, Miriam is dead.”

“No...”

“It happened this afternoon, an accident at the métro station. When I found your note I knew I had to tell you in person. Patrick, I'm so sorry. I know how you felt about her. I've always known and I should have helped you to tell her sooner. But your mother...”

“I don't understand...”

“Patrick, may I please come in and sit down for a few moments? The walk over seemed longer than usual...she was all I had left...”

I stand aside for her to enter and motion her into the living room. I pick up the wine glass meant for Miriam and now fill it for her sagging aunt. Silence fills the space between us on the sofa, broken only by the passing seconds marked by the clock on the mantle. I focus on its face, feel its dizziness as the long hand makes nearly twenty rotations before

we speak again.

"She was going to come, Patrick. I know she was. She had seen your note..."

"She was going to come?"

"Oui. I think so. Your note was on her dressing table. She had written you a reply. I tucked it out of sight from the police when they came to notify me of her death, knowing that it was for you only. I have not opened it."

Madame Beaufort holds out a small envelope to me with her tired, old hands. I take it and hold it unopened in my lap, still watching the clock on the mantle. Madame Beaufort relaxes back into the sofa, drifting to sleep as only a woman of age—so accustomed to loss—can do in moments of grief. I cover her up with Mama's wool throw and take Miriam's card to my bedroom.

The beat of her name once again marching in my head, I open the simple blue envelope holding her suicide note.

Dearest Patrick,

I must tell you something. I've always thought of you as a sunflower, so tall and steady in the searing heat of your mother's insults. I am not that strong. Hearing of your mother's accident brought back dark memories for me that I have tried to bury for so many years. Seeing your constant goodness, and now knowing that you wish to share that goodness with me...I do not deserve it. I am not good.

I must confess to you now, Patrick. Someone as pure as you cannot possibly understand, but my father was not a nice man and I rid myself of him years ago. My mother's death beside him was a fitting consequence for her complacency in his evil. Yet, in your invitation, in your goodness, I see that no matter how I have tried to justify my actions I am no less evil than they were. This is why I must end it. You are too good for me, Patrick. Please take care of my aunt. Tell her I'm sorry for the pain I am bringing to her—to you both.

Love,
Miriam